

## CHAPTER 11

I was up in Alice Springs during this time of soul searching. I read an advertisement in the paper for research and liaison officers in the Commonwealth Government's Office of Aboriginal Affairs. I applied for the position of liaison officer. There were five hundred applicants, most of them white people, and one hundred and ten or more applications from Aborigines or Torres Strait Islanders.

The new office was convening a conference a few weeks afterwards in Sydney and I decided I would like to go along to this because they were introducing Dr H.C. Coombes and Mr Barrie Dexter and Mr Frank Moy to the Aboriginal people. They were also going to interview this short list of people for liaison officers during the conference. I was told to be prepared for the interview.

I was interviewed by Professor Stanner, Mr Dexter and Dr Coombes, who at that time would have known as much about Aborigines as I know about flying to the moon. They told me that they would have liked me to have applied for a research officer job, but went through the liaison officer interviews anyway.

Mr Frank Moy phoned me later and told me I did not get the job as liaison officer but asked would I consider a position as a research officer. I asked Mr Moy if I could think it over. They gave me a couple of days to think about it and talk it over with my wife. We decided it was the best thing to do and I accepted.

It was around this time that 'Boomanulla' (Mervyn Williams) was killed. Boomanulla was a real drunk and most people called him a no-hoper. He had only one tooth in the front of his mouth. He was always getting into trouble for one reason or another.

I thought he was a unique man. He had greatness in him.

Booma was previously a very good sportsman. All his brothers are very good sportsmen, good musicians, a very talented family. Other notables in the Williams family are Candy Williams and Harry Williams.

Well, this was Booma. He did not smoke. But he drank. Harry did not drink. But he smoked. And Candy did neither. That is how we Aborigines described these three outstanding Williams boys. Yet they could play all the musical instruments. They could sing, dance and entertain and play sports. Each of them had a tremendous personality.

I was friends with the three brothers, but Booma and I were closer because we were always working together. He would come down to the Foundation and help me in numerous ways. He was brilliant in social efforts like running dances. He and I had an arrangement. The executive would not pay him for helping me so I used to slip him a few dollars every night. I don't know what he did with it. He probably drank some of it, paid his rent and bought some food.

He would often help the Foundation for nothing, working for days and days on end. He was really helpful because he mixed amongst the real nitty-gritty of the Aboriginal people. This allowed me to keep my finger on the pulse of what people were thinking. He, with Roy Carroll and Chicka Dixon, advised me on all kinds of issues relating to programmes as well as the all-important question: Are we doing the right thing for our people? I would say that he was my best friend while I was at the Foundation and probably one of the greatest friends I have ever had. We were very different in our life styles. Booma was not one who believed in having a great many baths. He reckoned it weakened you. Nevertheless, he would come to our place and have a shower and change into his clean clothes.

When I attended speaking engagements we would always travel together. When he was out with me and he had to do a job, he was as neat as a pin. He was right on the ball. He said the right thing, did the right thing and had perfect manners. He would stay in reasonably good motels and so on. Booma liked that, a room to himself. He had never had that in the latter part of his life and it

gave him a little bit of dignity. He was my friend. One day he was hit by a car on the way home from the Foundation. The sun caught the driver in the eye as he turned a corner and he could not see. Booma was in the middle of the road and he was hit full-on. It was terrible.

This was why Sydney was not as attractive to me as it previously had been because of Booma not being there. The offer to go to Canberra was therefore easier to accept.

I had my reservations about the job of research officer because I had the feeling that I might be circumscribed in my efforts. The government might try to cancel me out as an activist in the field of Aboriginal affairs. But it provided me with an entry to the Office of Aboriginal Affairs and most of all with the chance of doing something on a national basis.

I saw the job as a compromise. I saw the limitations that would be placed upon me but I also recognized the possibilities in the position. For the time being I would devote myself to the Commonwealth and try to do something on a national basis. The activist role would have to belong to some other people. There were plenty of other people who could do that as well as, if not better than I did.

That was my justification for joining the Commonwealth. I knew that I was, in a way, being bought off. Perhaps some people may have thought that I could do something worthwhile. I also thought it would be an opportunity for me to see how the administrative system worked in terms of Aboriginal affairs and how I could influence the policy makers behind the scenes. I needed the administrative experience also.

But the effect of my going in the Office was shattering, demoralizing. I would say that for the first six months I never had a more degrading experience in all my life. People set out deliberately to show me where I belonged (or should belong), and to make me feel completely an inferior person and nonentity in Aboriginal affairs. I was prepared to endure this because I thought my motivation for joining the Commonwealth was strong enough to allow these things to happen and still do something concrete. They were pretty bad at times.